What is An Error?

By Nsakala Lengo

Many language teachers complain about their students' inability to use the linguistic forms that they are taught. This situation is due to the teachers' false impression that output should be an authentic representation of input. This ignores the function of *intake*--that knowledge of language the students internalize. Intake may be independent of the teacher's syllabus being subject to an internal system analogous to Chomsky's language acquisition device (LAD).

Errors have played an important role in the study of language acquisition in general and in examining second and foreign language acquisition in particular. Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language (Richards 1974; Taylor 1975; Dulay and Burt 1974). Errors are also associated with the strategies that people employ to communicate in a language.

Errors are believed to be an indicator of the learners' stages in their target language development. From the errors that learners commit, one can determine their level of mastery of the language system. The investigation of errors has thus a double purpose: it is diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell us the learner's *,tat de langue* (Corder 1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learners' current problems.

This paper is concerned with the analysis of the notion of error. Errors are easily detected by language teachers, but errors are not always interpreted in the same way. This paper attempts to clarify phenomena that occur when we are faced with what are called errors.

Boundary Between Error and Non-error

Corder (1973:259) refers to errors as breaches of the code. Errors deviate from what is regarded as the norm. The problem, however, is that sometimes there is not firm agreement on what the norm is. Languages have different varieties or dialects with rules that differ from the standard. Additionally, native speakers of a language sometimes have different rules, and their individual codes are called *idiolects* . This amounts to saying that there is not always a clear-cut boundary between errors and non-errors. The conjunction *while* in Yorkshire English corresponds to *until* in Standard English and thus should not be regarded as an error when used in that sense by someone who is speaking the Yorkshire variety. Certain forms which are acceptable in some situations are not acceptable in others. For example, young women in their late teens and beyond do not like to be referred to as *girls* , in English, preferring the term women instead. Social gaffes of this kind are pragmatic errors.

The difference between native speakers and foreign language learners as regards errors is believed to derive from competence. Foreign language learners commit errors largely because of

the paucity of their knowledge of the target language, whereas deviant forms produced by native speakers are dismissed as slips of the tongue or slips of the pen. That is, they originate not from deficient competence but from performance phenomena such as changes of plans. It should be noted, however, that the vagueness of the notion of native speaker does not allow us to make an objective examination of deviant forms. Intuitively, it seems that there are degrees of native speakership, as there are degrees of foreign language proficiency. Native speakership in literate societies would tend to be related to the level of education. The native speaker by whom Chomsky and other linguists swear is probably not an illiterate person.

Many of the deviant forms produced by uneducated and less educated native speakers are regarded as nonstandard, while foreign language learners' errors are mostly accounted for in terms of their learning stages. They cannot be termed nonstandard because learners do not belong to a particular geographical or social group in the target language; consequently, their utterances are tested against the norm for the standard variety of the target language. For example, if a Zairean learner of English who had never been to England produced a form like I *were a student* , which may be heard in Yorkshire, this would be regarded as erroneous rather than an example of a nonstandard variety.

Relation of Errors to Tasks

The notion of *control* is an important one in learners' language use. Control is a term introduced in second and foreign language acquisition literature (see Sharwood-Smith 1986) to account for the discrepancy between competence and performance. That is, learners may well have acquired certain forms of the target language, but they may not be able to produce them correctly because they have not mastered their use. For this reason, the proponents of the notion of control believe that performance does not reflect competence in a sufficiently transparent way (Sharwood-Smith 1986:12).

There is variation in learners' performance depending on the task. Learners may have more control over linguistic forms for certain tasks, while for others they may be more prone to error. Krashen's *Monitor Model* is based on this premise. Krashen (1981 and elsewhere) suggests that tasks which require learners to focus attention on content are more likely to produce errors than those which force them to concentrate on form. Wenk (1986:128), in his study of speech rhythms of French learners of English, noticed that the learners could produce target-quality vowels "in mimicry of contextualized disyllables" but they were unable to do so when they had to "programme a connected utterance involving numerous successions of accented and unaccented syllables."

Compared to spontaneous speech, planned discourse allows for greater use of metalinguistic knowledge and results in fewer errors. Time seems to play a determining role. Hulstijn and Hulstijn (1984) suggest that poor learners need more time to produce speech material because they have little control over their linguistic awareness. A similar hypothesis is made by Krashen in his Monitor theory. He believes that the learners' monitor--i.e., their capacity for modifying

utterances through the application of consciously learned rules--operates under three conditions: time, focus on form, and knowledge of the rule.

Differences are also observed in performance depending on whether the communicative task is spoken or written. Foreign language learners tend to commit relatively more errors in spontaneous speech than in written discourse. This phenomenon is also related to the time available for planning and is referred to as *style shifting* . There tend to be various degrees of monitoring, and its degree of accuracy, depending on the task performed and attention to form (Dickerson 1975; Tarone 1983, 1985; Ellis 1987). Even native speakers exhibit differences in performance between writing and spontaneous speech.

Relation of Errors to Context

Some errors exhibited by foreign language learners are context-bound. They largely depend on the linguistic context wherein the forms produced appear. Certain linguistic environments have a facilitative effect, prompting learners to produce target-like forms, while others are debilitating, inducing error.

Sato (1984) studied the production of consonant clusters by two Vietnamese learners of English and found that the subjects produced clusters correctly depending on whether they appeared in syllable-initial or syllable-final position.

Luba speakers usually cannot produce the affricate /dz/ followed by any vowel other than /i/. For example, jeep would be pronounced correctly by Luba speakers but not the word jazz.

Global Error and Local Error

People with teaching experience have certainly encountered situations where they have difficulty locating the exact error committed by a student in an essay. Teachers often end up covering a whole sentence or paragraph with red marks. This phenomenon implies that an error is not always something that can be easily spotted. An error can vary in magnitude. It can cover a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, a phrase, a clause, a sentence, or even a paragraph. This state of affairs prompted Burt and Kiparsky (1974:73) to distinguish between global error and local error. A global error is one which involves "the overall structure of a sentence" and a local error is one which affects "a particular constituent." Richards, et al. (1985:123) give the following examples of global and local error:

Global error -*I like take taxi but my friend said so not that we should be late for school.
Local error -*If I heard from him I will let you know.

The first sentence is the kind of sentence that would be marked by a language teacher as erroneous, and in the second sentence only heard would be marked as erroneous.

It should be pointed out that errors have variable effect on intelligibility. Some errors have little effect in the sense that they do not impede comprehension. Others, however, can cause comprehension problems. Let us consider the following pair of sentences given by Richards, et al. (1985:96):

* Since the harvest was good, was rain a lot last year.
* The harvest was good last year, because plenty of rain.

In spite of its ungrammaticality, the second sentence makes sense. However, the reader or listener is unable to tell whether the first sentence is a question or a statement. It looks like a question because of the inversion of subject and verb in the main clause, but at the same time, it looks like a statement because it ends in a period. If the sentence were spoken perhaps the intonation could solve this problem with a rising intonation suggesting it is a question, and a falling intonation indicating a statement.

Omission, Addition, Selection, and Ordering

According to Corder (1973:277), errors fall into four main categories: *omission* of some required element; *addition* of some unnecessary or incorrect element; *selection* of an incorrect element; and *misordering* of elements.

Omission

Certain linguistic forms may be omitted by the learner because of their complexity in production. In pronunciation consonant clusters often create problems for foreign learners and some of their constituents may be left unpronounced. It should be noted that this phenomenon is not restricted to foreign language learners but is observed even with native speakers. The difference, however, is that native speakers tend to follow existing conventions while foreign language learners do not.

Omission also occurs in morphology. Learners often leave out the third person singular morpheme -s, the plural marker -s and the past tense inflection -ed. A learner could say, for example *, *A strange thing happen to me yesterday* -which signals a problem with his/her control of the past tense inflection in English (see Nsakala 1986). However, this phenomenon is also exhibited in native-speaker speech and originates from a natural tendency of assimilation of /d/ to the following /t/ in all but the most stilted speech/h'pendtu/ /h'penttu/ and the geminate /tt/ is then ripe for reduction to /t/.

In syntax learners may omit certain elements which are obligatory, e.g. * *Must say also the names?* instead of *Must we also say the names?* This phenomenon is also exhibited by native speakers but in accordance with certain conventions. There are a number of fixed expressions or idioms in English characterized by omission of certain syntactic elements, e.g. *Beg your pardon?, Long time no see, Had a nice day?* , etc.

Addition

Learners not only omit elements which they regard as redundant but they also add redundant elements. In phonology, a frequent phenomenon is *epenthesis* , which consists of the insertion of an additional vowel. Some languages have phonotactic constraints which allow few consonant clusters (e.g. Japanese and many African languages). Some languages also have phonotactic constraints on how a word can begin (e.g. In Arabic a word must begin with a consonant) or how it can end (e.g. Japanese words all end in either a vowel or a nasal consonant; and in most Bantu languages, words end in a vowel). Epenthetic vowels can then be used to make a foreign word fit the first-language pattern.

With many African learners of French and English (and possibly other languages) epenthesis tends to follow the rules of vowel harmony in the learners' mother tongues. Luba speakers of French often say *aradio* , and *,retard* instead of *radio* and *retard* respectively.

In morphology learners often overuse the third person singular morpheme -s and the plural marker -s. A learner may say * *I thinks* and * *The books is here* instead of *I think* and *The book is here* , respectively.

At the syntactic level the learner may produce a wrong combination, as for example, using the article with a place name: * *The London* instead of *London*.

At the lexical level the learner may add an unnecessary word, e.g. * *I stayed there during five years ago* , instead of *I stayed there for five years*.

Selection

Learners commit errors in pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary due to the selection of the wrong phoneme, morpheme, structure or vocabulary item. At the phonological level this phenomenon may be characterized by interlingual transfer, the learner substituting a familiar phoneme from the mother tongue for a target phoneme that is difficult to pronounce. English consonants /o/ and /D/ are often mispronounced as /s/, /t/, /f/, or /z/, /d/, and /v/ respectively.

An error can be committed in morphology as a result of the selection of a wrong morpheme. For example, the learner can use -est instead of -er for the comparative, producing a sentence like * *My friend is oldest than me* . However, it appears that morphological errors in English due to selection are not as frequent as errors in other linguistic spheres, because of the relatively small number of inflections and of their restricted usage.

In syntax the learner may select a wrong structure, e.g. *I want that he comes here instead of I want him to come here. This error may be induced by interlingual transfer or generalization.

At the lexical level learners sometimes select words which do not entirely convey their intended meanings. A robin may simply be referred to as a bird. This type of error is prompted by the strategy of approximation (Tarone 1977) or semantic contiguity (Bialystok and Froelich 1980).

Ordering

Misordering can occur in pronunciation by shifting the position of certain phonemes, e.g., a speaker may say * *fignisicant* instead of *significant*.

At the morphological level misordering of bound morphemes in English is perhaps less frequent, given their limited number; but in the example * *He's get upping now*, the learner attaches the inflection -ing to the particle of the two-word verb *get up*.

Learners can also misorder words as in the sentence, * *He's a dear to me friend*, where constituents of a single noun phrase are split.

At the lexical level the learner may reverse elements of a compound word. *Car key* may become *key car*, which may be regarded as a car carrying keys or the most important car in a caravan.

Productive and Receptive Error

Errors can also be classified as *productive* and *receptive* . Productive errors are those which occur in the language learner's utterances; and receptive or interpretive errors are those which result in the listener's misunderstanding of the speaker's intentions. Competence in a language can be regarded as composed of productive competence and receptive competence. These two competencies do not develop at the same rate. It is not uncommon to hear people say that they understand a language better than they can speak it, or vice versa.

It is easier to look into productive errors than receptive errors. Analysis of productive errors is based on learners' utterances, but to investigate receptive errors, one needs to look at people's reactions to orders, requests, etc. The way a listener behaves can give us some clues as to whether s/he has understood the message or not. If a person responds *I am twelve* to a question like *What is your name?* it can be assumed that s/he did not understand the content of the question (Corder 1973:262). However, there are a vast number of ways in which receptive behaviour operates, some of which are culture-specific. The response *I am twelve* may also illustrate the interlocutor's refusal to give his or her name. The investigator's interpretation in a situation like this is not black and white. A strange or unexpected response or reaction on the part of the interlocutor is not necessarily evidence that s/he has misunderstood the speaker's intentions.

Conclusion

The concept of error is not always objective and clear-cut. There is not always a distinct boundary between error and non-error. Dialectal, idiosyncratic, and contextual factors must be considered in the study of errors-not to mention the fact that errors are variable in scale. In treating the different types of errors which occur in learners' utterances, sensitivity is called for on the part of both the teacher and the learner.

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